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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of alumni in the financial support of higher education, explored student involvement as a means for understanding alumni involvement, and reported on the effects of having a student alumni association. Twenty-eight of 80 alumni associations contacted participated in the survey, and each of these had a student alumni association. Representatives of these associations completed the Student Alumni Association Questionnaire online and returned a hard copy. The average age of the responding organizations was 16 years. At one end of the continuum were student alumni associations consisting of a large group of student members, and at the other end were student alumni associations restricted to a small group of student leaders. Research studies have shown that alumni who are financial contributors to their alma maters are also likely to have involvement with their alma mater. This study supported the proposition that the level of alumni involvement is linked to the basic perception and relationship of each alumna/alumnus to the alma mater. The overall conclusion from the survey is that student alumni associations are a relatively inexpensive and very effective means of educating and interacting with the student population. (Contains 27 references.) (SLD)

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Running head: INCREASING ALUMNI INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT

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Increasing Alumni Involvement and Alumni Financial Support through a Student Alumni Association

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Introduction

Alumni are one of the most important resources to colleges and universities. They are a source of direction through participation in voluntary leadership positions. They are a source for prospective students by being spokes persons of their experiences during college. They are a source of continual involvement by returning to campus an participating in events. They are a source for financial support in a day and age when higher education expenses are costly and private voluntary contributions are resources sought by many competitors.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is threefold: (a) to investigate the role of alumni in the financial support of higher education, (b) to discuss student involvement as a means for understanding alumni involvement, and (c) to descriptively report the effects of having a student alumni association.

Review of the Literature Review

"American higher education is passing through a period of severe financial strain" (Willemain, Goyal, Van Deven, and Thukral, 1994, p. 609). It is generally an accepted fact that the cost of a college education is skyrocketing although financial support to institutions of higher education by the local, state, and federal governments is dwindling. Increased competition for sources of private funding is causing additional financial strain on higher education (Petit, 1997).

As a result of this increased financial strain, colleges and universities are raising tuition and fees and they are actively seeking additional financial support. It is important for higher education institutions to receive additional financial support. Not only does

additional financial support help balance the budget, but additional support is needed to attract quality faculty and students, and to maintain state-of-the-art facilities. All of which are necessary for a quality education.

The presence of financial strain, and the need for additional financial support is forcing colleges and universities to locate alternative sources for support. Voluntary support is a primary alternative source for higher education funding. Leslie and Ramey (1986) propose that "voluntary support [of higher education] is becoming the only source of real discretionary money and in many cases is assuming a critical role in balancing institutional budgets" (p. 1).

Voluntary support for higher education is on the rise. "Between 1980 and 1994, voluntary support for higher education rose nearly every year, outpacing both inflation and the growth in charitable contributions to most other sectors of the nonprofit community. More than one-half of this charitable support was provided by individual alumni and non-alumni contributors, making them the largest supporters of higher education. The likely continuation of recent trends will make individuals a very important source of charitable support for colleges and universities in the years to come" (Horton, 1995, p. 6). Strong competition for voluntary resources is a future trend in giving to higher education institutions, according to a report by the Council for Aid to Education (Morgan, 1995).

With voluntary support being a vital source of funding, and with increased competition for sources of voluntary support, it is important for colleges and universities to understand how to grow and maintain voluntary support. Voluntary support consists of two entities: alumni and non-alumni. Alumni are the core group of constituents and

largest source of voluntary support. "In 1994, alumni contributed more than 28 percent of the total support for higher education, while non-alumni contributed 23 percent. Alumni have given more philanthropic support than non-alumni every year since 1980, except in 1984" (Horton, 1995, p. 4). According to Mosser, "alumni/ae were responsible for fully one quarter of all private voluntary support of higher education" (1993, p. 2). And in a study on the voluntary support of education, the Council for Aid to Education reported that the majority of financial contributions came from alumni (Morgan, 1995). The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that alumni were the largest contributors of voluntary support of higher education for the year 1998-1999 (Lively, 2000).

Due to the paramount role that alumni play in providing voluntary financial support to higher education institutions, it is essential for colleges and universities to understand what motivates alumni to contribute financially to their alma mater. Leslie, Drachman, Conrad, and Ramey (1983) assert "because private giving is critical to all postsecondary institutions, especially in the independent sector, a clear understanding of the forces influencing voluntary support will be very important" (p. 223).

According to research, there are several factors which influence alumni to contribute financially to their alma mater: (a) undergraduate experiences such as student involvement (Miller & Casebeer, 1990), (b) alumni involvement with their alma mater (Bruggink & Siddiqui 1995; Hunter, Enid, & Boger 1999; Mosser 1993; Taylor & Martin, 1993; Young & Fischer, 1996), (c) institution tradition and prestige (Leslie & Ramey, 1986), (d) economic success of individual alumni (Leslie & Ramey, 1986), (e) emotional attachment and quality of relationships between alumni and their alma mater (Brittingham & Pezzullo, 1989; Mosser, 1993; Spaeth & Greeley, 1970), (f) academic

success (Miller & Casebeer, 1990), (g) and overall satisfaction with the student experience (Miller & Casebeer, 1990). It seems from a global perspective, that all of these factors fundamentally shape alumni perception, opinion, and relationship with the alma mater.

Even though several factors are identifiable, there is not enough research in the area of higher education fund raising to identify and fully understand the factors that influence voluntary contributions (Miller & Casebeer, 1990; Mosser, 1993). According to Brittingham and Pezzullo "research on fund raising in higher education is both limited and fragmented" (1989, p.1). Thus, further research needs to be done in order to assess and understand alumni motivation to give.

Leslie and Ramey (1986) report that soliciting alumni does not significantly affect individual contribution to higher education institutions. Too often, higher education institutions cold contact their alumni. This practice may have marginal results at best, but often this practice leaves a negative impact on alumni, especially young alumni.

Higher education institutions need to realize the personal side of giving. Colleges and universities are contacting people with individual views of their institution. "Development officers raise funds by establishing and nurturing long-term relationships between persons at their institutions—including themselves—and potential donors, then strengthening those relationships once donors make their gifts....Any gift received by a respondent institution was the result of personal ties between the donor and the people at the institution, whether the president or school head, deans, professors, or development officers. The bottom line is as it's always been, people give to people" (Altizer, 1992, p. iii).

As evidenced in the research, a very strong influence of alumni giving is alumni involvement with their alma mater. Strong relationships between the alma mater and alumni positively impact alumni involvement and alumni contributions (Petit, 1997; Duronio & Loessin, 1990). It seems inherent that alumni become involved with their alma mater due to the established relationship. At the basic, fundamental level, if alumni have a positive opinion of their alma mater they will be more likely to be involved. If that opinion is negative, not only will they not be involved, they may detract from the progression and development of the university. After all, one of the best means for attracting new students is through word of mouth and testimonials from alumni. Therefore, it seems intuitive that opinion formation is linked to the involvement of alumni with their alma mater and in turn with alumni voluntary contribution of financial support.

A progression exists in the evolutionary path from student to alumni donor (Young and Fischer 1996). This progression begins with shared relationships between current students. The quality of shared relationships at the collegiate level may impact the level of involvement as alumni. And in turn, the level of alumni involvement impacts the voluntary contribution from alumni.

Thus, it seems, there is a natural process occurring. What happens during the collegiate experience fundamentally shapes alumni perception, opinion, and relationship with the alma mater. These influence the alumni involvement with the higher education institution. The presence and level of alumni involvement is a strong factor related to alumni voluntary support.

Based on the compilation of research, a simple and successful method for shaping opinion and for preparing students to become involved alumni, is to educate students on the roles, benefits, and services of alumni. "Developing active alumni begins prior to graduation." (Johnson & Eckel, 1997, pg. 227). Mosser (1993) asserts that it is important to involve current students in the realm of alumni giving. This involvement is beneficial because it helps current students to understand their future role as alumni contributors. Mosser indicates that a very good way for informing students of the necessity and responsibility of their future role as alumni is to make available concrete examples of how alumni contributions have aided the educational process for current students. This can be accomplished through access to financial aid figures, university equipment, and other university resources that were made available through the financial support of alumni. Cockriel and Kellogg propose that "the more students understand the concepts of philanthropy and fund raising while in college, the easier it will be to get them to make a gift as alumni" (1994, p. 1).

To help facilitate this educational process for involvement with the university beyond graduation, many colleges and universities have incorporated student alumni associations. Reasons for formulating a student alumni association can be explained as a mathematical expression based on a combination of research and practice:

> Alumni Education + Student Involvement = Alumni Involvement (where voluntary financial contribution is a function of Alumni Involvement)

It is important to understand student involvement factors when creating a student alumni association. One factor associated with student involvement is satisfaction with the college experience. Astin (1984, 1985) links satisfaction as an outcome of involvement. Reed and Schallert (1993) suggest that involvement results in affective

responses such as pleased, proud, excited, and so on. In addition, Whitt (1994) reports that as a result of in and out of classroom involvement, non traditional students have a positive self-confidence and are more likely to be satisfied with their college experience.

Another factor of student involvement is student development. Williams and Winston (1985) indicate "through their participation in organized student activities, students seem to become more aware of the educational environment and of the resources and learning opportunities available to help them meet academic demands" (p. 57). They report participation in extracurricular activities enhances college students' total development. "Students who participated in organized student activities and organizations showed statistically significantly greater developmental task achievement in the areas of interdependence, educational plans, career plans, and lifestyle plans than did students who did not participate" (p. 56). Student groups and organizations primarily consist of out of class and extracurricular activities. Miller and Jones (1988) suggest that "out-of class activities form an essential part of this [students' educational] development" (p. 669).

Involvement can be influenced by other "variables such as current goals, understanding, concentration, attention, affect, and task difficulty" (Reed & Schallert, 1993, p. 265). Such variables are vital to educational learning environments and student involvement.

Policies and practices have detrimental impacts on student involvement (Astin 1984, 1985; Whitt, 1984). From library hours to student organization guidelines, administrators regularly make policies that directly impact the college experience. These policies greatly shape the environment in which the college experience takes place.

Whether it's respect, authority, care, or concern, policies convey messages of value. This is important because it equates that higher education administrators, including alumni and development professionals have a great deal of influence on the college experience and consequently alumni opinion.

However, it is difficult to totally account for factors, which influence satisfaction with the college experience. According to Benjamin and Hollings (1995), due to the complexity and multilevel of a student's life, student satisfaction consists of many variables. Also, not only is a student's life and experience full of multiplicity, there are many uncontrollable variables that influence the opinion of the college experience (e.g. career earnings).

Application

This leads to practical application for educating students regarding involvement as alumni. Creating opportunities for student involvement through environmental factors (e.g. student organizations) can help shape and guide students toward meaningful educational and developmental growth.

Establishing a student alumni organization is rooted in a desire to introduce the alumni association, its benefits and services, to the undergraduate student population. The desire of establishing a relationship with students before they become alumni is to ultimately increase the likeliness that young alumni will have greater propensity for involvement and their involvement will eventually generate financial support for the university.

Background

An alumni association from a Midwest university was facing a problem. The problem was that the undergraduate student population did not understand the role, services, and benefits of the alumni association. Through informal interviewing, question and answer conversations, and even through unsolicited responses, it has come to the understanding of the alumni association that students view the primary role of the alumni association to be fund raising. One reoccurring finding was that cold contacting of young alumni might be having a negative impact upon the young alumni perception of the alumni association. This could establish a barrier between young alumni and involvement with the university.

Due to the lack of resources of new graduates, young alumni were very hesitant to take interest or become involved with the alumni association because of this perception of financial solicitation. In addition, young alumni were annoyed by solicitation of funds that they did not have. Thus, the misperception resulted in avoidance and at times even disgust with their alma mater. This situation is consistent with research. According to Petit, "premature solicitations to graduates that have not been fostered stifles alumni financial support" (1997, p. 27).

However the main role of the alumni association under discussion is not to raise funds for the university but to raise friends of the university. Yet, the ability to raise a friendship to the university was being hampered by the misperception of the role of the alumni association.

Research reports that the source for alumni financial support is typically generated by older alumni. "Older alumni [are] significantly more likely to donate relative to their more recent counterparts" (Okunade & Berl, 1997, p. 209). They also

report "that younger alumni exhibit a lower propensity to give relative to the old vintage alumni" (p. 212). Willemain, Goyal, Van Deven, and Thukral (1994) found that there is an increase in average donation per giver over time. Causation to this factor is attributed to the increase of alumni wealth as alumni age.

Thus, the probability to donate increases with age due to the likeliness that older alumni will have more resources from which to give than will younger alumni. Obviously, down the road, young alumni will fill the ranks of older alumni. Intuitively, it makes sense to increase the involvement of young alumni so that when they do have the resources to give financially, the relationship is already in place with their alma mater.

Once again it is important to assert that a relationship exists between the involvement of alumni with their alma mater and influences on alumni voluntary support. Ultimately, there is a dance to be struck. Once alumni reach an ability and level of financial stability in which they have the resources to give, the alma mater must be in good standing with the alumni in order to receive voluntary support. Therefore, the alumni association needs to establish a quality relationship early. It was to this end that the alumni association under investigation decided to create a student alumni association.

The Board of Directors from this alumni association agreed with the assertion that the best time to educate and recruit alumni is while they are still students. Therefore, they charged their alumni association to create and implement a student organization within the alumni association. The alumni association personnel charged with the assignment of creating a student organization set up guidelines to give direction to the formation of the organization.

These guidelines were established through research of student affairs literature and models, through help and advice from current on campus organizations, and through help and advice from already established alumni associations across the United States. Items researched included, goal attainment, student involvement, student motivation, student outcomes, recruitment, group structure, and programming.

Once the guidelines were established, the alumni personnel identified the needs and the capacities to which the student organization would serve the alumni association. After the first year, the alumni association personnel decided to assess and evaluate their student organization. The assessment was based on comparing their student organization with student alumni associations from similar higher education institutions. The comparison was accomplished by collecting data regarding these student organizations.

Method

Participants

An e-mail requesting participation in the research project was sent to 80 alumni associations who belonged to a professional organization for alumni associations. Twenty-eight alumni associations agreed to participate in the survey resulting in a response rate of 35 percent. Of the total 28 associations, 27 were strictly alumni associations and 1 was considered both an alumni association and development foundation. Each participating alumni association had a student organization. Of the total 28 student organizations, the average age of the student organizations was 16 years.

Instrument

The alumni associations completed the Student Alumni Association Questionnaire (SAAQ) online and returned a hard copy. The estimated time to complete the SAAQ is

15 minutes. The SAAQ is an intuitive measurement developed by the advisor of an alumni association for identifying and understanding the experiences of student alumni associations through the means of gathering and comparing data from established student alumni associations. The SAAQ gathers descriptive data regarding the purposes, goals, inputs, and outcomes of student alumni associations. The SAAQ does not have validity or reliability measurements.

The SAAQ primarily consists of a five point Likert scale, anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree. Depending upon the question, the Likert scale also contains a sixth column, that allows the respondent to select "does not apply." The purpose of this column is to help gather specific descriptive information and further understand each individual student alumni association's experiences. In addition, almost every section contains an open ended, short-answer question. Even though the data gathered was quantifiable, the ultimate use of the data was qualitative.

Results

The data gathered is for the descriptive purpose of identifying and understanding the presence of student alumni associations. To achieve this end, the results of the SAAQ were compiled into themes: group traits, resources, student involvement, alumni involvement, and benefits.

Group Traits

Research was gathered from mature (in terms of age and experience) student organizations. The average age of the student alumni association was 16 years. Group size seemed to be related to the resources of the alumni association. Strong financing and

a large quantity of time devoted from alumni association personnel to the student association made it easier to manage a large number of student members.

Group size and characteristics reflected the purpose of the student organization. At one end of tne continuum, were student alumni associations consisting of a large group of student members. At the other end of the continuum, were student alumni associations that were restricted to a small group of student leaders. The purpose and goals were always the same: interact and educate students regarding the alumni association.

Resources

Alumni associations reported that creating and maintaining a student association did not require a lot of resources (e.g. time, finances, personnel) from the alumni association. However, it is important to note that financing and personnel were the most important concerns when starting a new student organization.

One avenue that was used quite extensively to increase alumni association interaction with students was to have the student organization (or alumni association) partner or provide support with other student organizations/activities. It was also reported that one of the best methods for attracting students into the student organization is by word of mouth and utilizing a popular form of student advertising, such as a student newspaper.

Student Involvement

Visibility, interacting, and getting involved in the life of students was reported to be very important for generating a positive perception in students regarding the alumni association. Many alumni associations strongly agreed that their student organization

helped to generate current student interest, increased student understanding regarding the alumni association, positively impacted young alumni involvement, and most of all eased interaction with current students.

Alumni Involvement

Eighty-three percent of alumni associations indicate that a goal of the student organization is to impact future membership in the alumni associations. However, sixty-four percent of the participating alumni associations believe that student organizations helped to increase membership in the alumni association.

Benefits

Student alumni associations were determined to be beneficial because they provided an easy and useful means of reaching alumni before they became alumni. To reap benefits, the alumni associations made positive interactions with the student population. This interaction helped alumni associations to connect, educate, and develop understanding in students regarding the services and mission of the alumni association. The alumni associations reported that it was important for the student association to focus on serving all students, or at least as diverse a population as possible.

Discussion

One purpose of this study was to investigate the role of alumni in the financial support of higher education. There is current and future necessity to generate voluntary financial support from alumni. Based on research studies, those alumni who are financial contributors to their alma mater are also very likely to have involvement with their alma mater. This research confirmed the proposition that the level of alumni involvement is linked to the basic, fundamental perception, opinion, and relationship of each alumnae

with their alma mater. The relationship with the alma mater is cultivated during the collegiate experience and maintained throughout the lifetime of the alumnae.

A second purpose of this study was to discuss student involvement as a means for understanding alumni involvement. The college experience is comprised of a multiplicity of student factors, which directly influences the satisfaction with the undergraduate experience. One factor regarding the collegiate experience is student involvement. Student involvement directly impacts overall satisfaction and has been linked with the level of post graduation involvement. A common link between student involvement and alumni involvement is a student alumni association. This research found that a student alumni association helps to educate students of the roles, responsibilities, and benefits of being alumni.

A third purpose of this study was to descriptively report the effects of having a student alumni association. Descriptive outcomes and themes were generated through the data collection of 28 student alumni associations. The overall and shared conclusion is that student alumni associations are a relatively inexpensive and very effective means for alumni associations to educate and interact with the current student population. The investments (i.e. time, financial, personnel) are minor compared to the benefits.

Limitations and Drawbacks

A limitation of this research becomes the factor of time. Only, longitudinally will the research community be able to determine if having student alumni associations will increase young alumni involvement, which in turn will increase older alumni giving.

Based on the research regarding student organizations and the research regarding alumni giving, this study coupled these two domains for the identification and

understanding of the existence and outcomes of having a student alumni association. It is important to note that this research is a preliminary study into the understanding and outcomes of having a student alumni association. To fully assess and evaluate the outcomes of having a student alumni association, it would require a longitudinal observation, study, and comparison of the involvement and participation activity instances of alumni who were introduced to the alumni association when they were still students, and of the activity instances of alumni who were introduced to the alumni association after they became alumni.

Further research should look at increased participation in the alumni association as an outcome of having a student alumni association. Petit (1997) asserts that "effective alumni programs can be measured quantitatively by two methods. Initially, graduate participation as members of the alumni association demonstrates that alumni are staying informed via an alumni publication, meeting fellow graduates during club/chapter activities in their local area, and connecting with the university through reunions and services. Secondly, current information on graduates within the alumni database of records demonstrates that alumni wish to inform their alma mater and fellow graduates of new homes, jobs, marriages, children, and other milestones" (p.25). Many alumni associations already keep track of membership numbers and these contact instances. Therefore, it should be relatively easy to track trends in these areas.

Summary and Conclusion

Higher education institutions need financial support from their alumni. The competition for alumni resources is intense. In order to optimize securing alumni

financial support, colleges and universities need to establish practices that will build positive alumni perception, opinion, and relationship.

As evidenced through the experiences of 28 student alumni associations, one method for establishing these practices is through the utilization of a student alumni association. There are many benefits of having a student alumni association. A student alumni association allows the alumni association a method for education and interaction with students. A student alumni association can be set up to meet unique needs of individual alumni associations. Through creativity and teaming up with other student organizations, a student alumni association can operate on a relatively low budget.

The direct impact of a student alumni association on future financial support is extremely difficult to assess. It has been shown that alumni who stay involved are more likely to contribute financially. Even though further research is a necessity in this area, it should not be neglected that a student alumni association is a very valuable and productive means for an alumni association to educate and interact with students. This should help to lay a foundation to increase alumni involvement and alumni support.

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